

HanTsuki:SS One Day

A lone bag is on top of the lobby couch --.

It's an ordinary bag, but with pretty pink lines on the belt and on the edges, it's a lady's bag. It's quite different from what a boy would carry.

I intently gazed at that bag.

And for some reason I smiled involuntarily.

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"Sheesh, what are they talking about now?"

Avoiding my grinning face from being seen, I looked further into the lobby. Three middle-aged women were there standing and talking. One is my mom, the other is Rika's mom, and the third one is the hospital's chief nurse. These trio were exceedingly cheerful.

"You know how to write the kanji for 'noisy'?"

"Noisy?"

I tried to remember it, but I can't recall it at all.

"How is it written?"

"Three women"

When it was being said, I finally got it. Yup, it's [姦しい]. As I nodded in comprehension, I turned towards the speaker. There, as expected, was Rika. Sitting on the lobby couch, just like me she's not on pajamas. She was wearing a light purple, totally blossom-like, dress. I looked carefully at Rika, while various emotions were shaking through me. It felt a bit strange for Rika to be in plainclothes.

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"What?"

Just then Rika turned sullen.

As I was being overpowered, I mumbled,

"Ah, um, that. Well, for you in a normal dress ..."

It seemed Rika had misunderstood my words.

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She suddenly turned timid-faced and inquired me.

"Is it strange?"

And then she worriedly looked at her own clothes. Well. I felt that those kind of gestures were expected, more so for a girl. As I thought even Rika was worried over stuff like clothes. Besides, she was in hospital for too long, so she's probably not well-versed in current fashion.

"It ain't strange, it suits you"

"Really?"

"Yeah, it really suits you"

Truth was I really wanted to answer 'it's pretty', but somehow I embarrassingly couldn't bring out the words. I'll say it silently within me anyways. You're really pretty, Rika. It really suits you so don't fret on it.

After she muttered, seemingly glad and relieved, Rika softly exhaled.

"What's up, Rika?"

"Hm?"

"You're sighing or something"

"Hm"

In no way she was clear. Raising my head, I checked on our mothers. Looked like they're continuing their chit-chat. Everyone looked like extremely happy. And in high spirits.

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I sat down beside Rika.

"Now look, Rika. Say what you want, I'll seriously listen. I may not give you a good answer, but at least I can hear you out"

And then, something a bit unbelievable happened. Rika placed her own hand onto my hand which were on my lap. And then she grasped it. For some reason my hand moved on its own, me grasping and bundling up her hand in return. Our mothers are still continuing their talk, please let it continue, I pleaded. Let it continue, so I can continue joining hands like this with Rika no matter what.

"I'm a bit scared, since I'm hospital-bound for a long time"

"Scared?"

That was unexpected. Scared is the last word Rika would say. However, looking at Rika she was really nervous.

"I'm a bit scared, you see, of going out of the hospital"

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I desperately searched the words for that. As if I'm surprised, I cannot get out the right words. And more bad news, our mothers had finally wrapped up their chit-chat and walking on our direction. More surprises and confusion. In a few moments our mothers would get to our spot, and see that we have joined hands. We hurriedly separated our hands. And at that moment, my mouth finally moved.

"I'm here for you. Here with you all the way. So rest easy"

"Really?"

Rika asked again what was expected of me.

And I clearly answered.

"Really. I promise"

Yup, I said it earnestly.

Rika looked at me intently.

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"Let's go, Rika"

I stood up ahead of her, then held out my hand to Rika.

"Come on, take my hand"

"Thanks"

Rika took my outstretched hand. With a squeeze, our hands were gripping each other. It was just an instant though. At least this would be hidden from our mothers. I then picked up the pink-laced bag. It was insanely heavy, for it was filled with all the books Rika had filled in her room until the end. But its weight felt comfortable.

Me and Rika looked at each other once, then walked out.

Through the hospital exits.

Shoulder-to-shoulder, we went through the opened auto-doors in front of us.

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Today, Rika and I had left the hospital.

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Natsume had said this condescendingly.

"I'll make you two check out on the same day. And I already talked to Kouda-sensei. Hey, Ezaki-kun. You know what 'favor' is, and it goes for 'gratitude' too. Show some inspiration. There's this 'tears of gratitude' expressions. Come on, Ezaki-kun, you might have something to say to me. Go ahead, don't hold back, and say it."

That stupid doctor kept on repeating those words during the days before my hospital check out. And every time, I said through gritted teeth 'Thank you very much. I'm very much grateful to you doctor'. If I carelessly wreck Natsume's mood, he's capable of putting off our check out dates.

Damn that ass of a doctor.

He's really a pain to the backside until the very end.

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And as promised, I went on to take Rika for Hanami. They were already in full bloom when we checked out, so I was in a hurry to follow the schedule. These sakura blossoms would soon be shed off.

Rika's new residence was a townhouse just like our house. Although it looked like it was quite rare for people from other localities to come here, I thought it was better for her to stay in a more tidy house.

"Welcome, Yuuichi-kun"

Coming for me, Rika's mother opened the entryway with a smile.

"Rika is in the second floor"

"Ah, thanks"

Bowing down repeatedly, I let myself into the house. It really is an old house. And even more worn down than my own house. Even the stairway corners were rubbed down into curves. Because its door was opened I immediately located the room at the top of the stairs.

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"I'm here to get you, Rika"

Rika, standing in a room corner, was gazing at the bookshelf. The other furniture still weren't arranged, yet for some reason the bookshelf was there. As I was thinking that buying first a bookshelf was very much Rika's way of logic, I then said.

"What you're doing?"

"Hm, looking"

"At what?"

"Books"

It was what I expect for an answer. For a large bookshelf, it was already tightly packed with books. All of the ancient-looking books have their contents totally turned to faded colors to the point that not even the title was readable.

"Are these all from your father?"

"Yeah"

"That's a lot of books"

"Even so it's about half of what I have. I bought the largest shelf, and it's already full."

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I again looked at, closely, the bookshelf. My eye landed on Akutagawa Ryuunosuke's [Toshishun]. Second row from top, seventh book from left. A completely aged paperback. Oh, I remember. This was the beginning. I was holding this book the first time I went to see Rika.

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"Perhaps I'll die"

That time, Rika somehow smiled.

"And I'm already prepared"

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"I'm best happy if I did a really good thing. That's why I believe my mother let me be"

Then Rika voiced out those lyrics from campanella.

I whistled out and smiled.

"You did remember it well, didn't you?"

"*giggle*"

Rika was elated.

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"Go ahead and read it"

Rika hid her face halfway onto the futon.

"But read it properly, okay?"

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"As if we're reading it together all the time"

It was a promise we made each other, on the night the half moon rises. A definite promise.

"Sure, as if we're reading it together all the time"

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Rika and I just stood there, and spoke nothing. I didn't know what's on Rika's mind but perhaps she's thinking what I was thinking. Why, because even she saw what's immediately beside [Toshishun], the [Les Thibault]. The yellow book that I gave as a present to Rika ---

Quickly suppressing several of my emotions that were overflowing within me, I said.

"Let's head for the Hanami."

Sure, Rika nodded.

"We're going for the Hanami!"

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With Rika riding on the rear, I bicycled, firmly apply power into my legs, then pedaling. Light and wind came along, then drifted off into the back. On times when the road would curve, the bicycle would stagger for a bit.

"Rika, hold on tight"

Rika was supporting herself at around my beltline. Somewhat embarrassing, but pleasant, I felt a bit light-headed at that. I cannot feel the burden at all from what should be always heavy pedals. It's as if the bicycle was gliding on an icy surface.

"The wind feels good"

Rika said it smilingly.

"Really?"

"Yup. The outdoors feels good"

That's expected for a blue sky, carefree spring clouds, mild weather, cars running through the road, the noise from roadside trees being shaken by the wind, and bright sunlight. Everything of those might be unusual for her. Totally different from looking at them from the hospital window.

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"Hey, what are those?"

Rika had asked something just when we are entering the old city.

"Oh, those are stone lanterns"

"Stone lanterns?"

"Yup. They line up throughout along the road the connects the Outer Shrine to the Inner Shrine."

"Up to the Inner Shrine?"

"Yup. All the way."

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One, two, three, ... Rika started counting the stone lanterns. The lanterns stood about ten meters apart, so Rika was counting them before they went past by. Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three --.

I exasperatedly said,

"They are lots of them until the Inner Shrine, you can't count them."

"Shut your mouth. It's a pain counting them, but I'm not to lose count. Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine ---"

"I told you, you cannot count them"

"Shut it! Look, now I've lost count! Yuuichi, you blockhead!"

My head was struck from behind.

Good grief this girl's a pain

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I bicycled on with all my might, up a long long ascent. The slope wasn't much, but it's a climb all the way. As expected I'm out of breath and my pedaling legs seem to be hung up.

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"You can do it"

Every time the climbing gets shaky, Rika would say that from behind.

"Sure. Hills like these are piece of cake!"

Of course I'm only bragging.

When in fact I was at my very limit.

"You can do it"

"Yeah"

"Go for it"

Rika's encouraging voice seemed somewhat enjoyable. A shame I couldn't ascertain what face she was making since I have no time for that.

"Go for it, Yuuichi"

The bicycle me and Rika were riding on climbed on every slowly uphill. It's shadow was cast onto the road. Me and Rika's shadow. Our outlines. Upon seeing it, I was emboldened on. Come on, just a little longer. The hilltop's coming up in sight.

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After fastening the bicycle at the end of the parking lot, we walked side-by-side for the Grand Shrine. There, there --- Rika was patting on my head just like how she would pat a dog. You did well, Yuuichi. There, there. Happy, ashamed, and embarrassed at her voice and at her hand's sensation, I sullenly-looking said,

"I'm not a dog"

Tee-hee, Rika smiled.

Being ashamed ended up somewhat not worrying over, so I too smiled.

"The Grand Shrine is ahead"

With the Uji-bashi just in front of us, I said that.

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With no signs of life on the shrine grounds on weekdays, it's just the two of us walking that vast deserted space. Rika was totally like a tourist, restlessly looking around the vicinity. Oh yeah, Rika knew nothing about here.

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We then took turns washing our hands.

"Come on, wash your hands"

Scooping up some water with a ladle, I bring it to Rika's hands.

"The cold feels good. We cleanse ourselves before praying, right?"

"Y, yeah. That would be the case"

Sheesh. *That should be the case*, that's something I didn't even thought of.

"Yuuichi, my turn"

"Go ahead"

I hand Rika the ladle, then this time bring up my hands to have it cleansed.

"Hey, that's cold!"

I felt a bad premonition.

"Rika! Hey, quit playing with the ladle! My shirt will get wet!"

"*giggle*"

"That ain't funny! Hey! I said my shirt will get wet!"

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My shirt sleeve got a bit wet. Goodness, she's one nasty girl. Rika was happily walking beside the disgruntled me along the path, her long hair bobbing along. Finally, we've arrived at the innermost part of the Grand Shrine. After a climb at the stair path, it was the inner sanctum.

Splurging, both me and Rika threw in JPY100 coins.

And what are our wishes?

Of course that's a secret.

While joining my hands, when I surreptitiously examine Rika's appearance, Rika was joining her hands with an extremely solemn expression.

I wonder what Rika was wishing for?

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The way to the Inner Shrine was called Oharai-machi or Okage-yoko-machi. A reconstruction of Ise's old section, even the walls of the post office is devoted to bringing out the ancient experience. However, these were oriented for

the tourists of the Grand Shrine, well outsiders they are, so locals like me don't come near it.

However for Rika she was unexpectedly pleased.

"Awesome! This is super awesome!"

She said something like that as she was seemingly enjoying the sights of the old town. I followed her close behind, smiling bitterly at her appearance.

"Eh, what's that?"

"Ah, that's tamari shoyu, a variety of rich shoyu"

"A rich shoyu ..."

"Well, it has a rich taste"

"And that?"

"Uh, probably a store for tekone-sushi"

"Tekone-sushi?"

"Sushi from bonito and vinegared rice, dipped in shoyu. It's from fishermen's cuisine and is hand-kneaded, hence tekone-sushi"

"I see. And that one?"

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Sheesh, what a fidgety one.

"Ise udon"

"Is that delicious?"

"Want to try eat it? Aren't you hungry by now?"

"Hmm--mm"

Rika was for some reason worried. And with a really earnest face.

"What is it?"

"I wonder which is tastier, tekone-sushi or Ise udon?"

"... Come on, you getting worried about that?"

I thought it was not really worrying. But after much agonizing, Rika chose Ise udon.

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And then, Rika was shocked at the Ise udon.

"W, what is this?"

She asked that, eyes wide open.

"What, that's Ise udon"

"Is this udon? For real?"

"Y, yeah"

"But it has no soup and toppings! It's only udon with shoyu poured over it."

"True, that's the Ise udon."

I then proceeded to sipping and slurping. Not bad, but still those from the stalls near the station taste better.

"Come on, try eat it"

"O, okay"

After timidly slurping on the noodles, it looked like Rika was even more shocked.

"It's soft! Isn't it overboiled!?"

"Well, that's what Ise udon is"

"Is this really udon!?"

"It really is"

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I was suddenly worried.

"Perhaps it doesn't taste good?"

"Hmm--mm"

Rika slurped on the noodles while tilting her head sideways.

"Eh? It tastes terrible?"

"Hmm--mm"

"W, what? Which is which?"

"Hmm--mm"

Rika kept tilting her head sideways until she finished her meal.

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After we finished our udon, we went around the back of the shrine road, into the banks of the Isuzu River. I was somewhat fond of this place.

"Refreshing, isn't it?"

Rika was saying this as she was dipping her hands into the waters.

I surveyed the surroundings.

"This brings back memories. I used to come here to swim when I was a kid"

"Swim, here?"

"Yup. Though I was a kid when I came here. Probably early grade school at that time. My father brought me along."

"I see, you came along with your father"

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Rika's expression turned a bit serious, but it wasn't like those pleasant spectacles that Rika has thought. I was still eight or nine years old when my father, intending to drink beer by the riverside, left me on my own. And ended up red-faced and dead drunk. At that time I pretended to be drowning, intending to panic my father, wishing that he show me a little concern. Nevertheless, even as I bobbed up the water and repeatedly shouting, my father totally showed no response. The way I saw it, my father was asleep by the riverside. After quitting my act, I went ashore, already lost interest in swimming. Sitting beside my father who was fast asleep, I then hugged his lap. By the time my father woke up it was dusk, and my body was completely cold. When we went home I went down with fever, and stayed bedridden for three days. My father was scoled by my mother who was indignant, and it was rare for him to be dejected.

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"Hey, Yuuichi"

As I lay asleep inside my room, my father showed up.

"You want some ice?"

No wonder he's a lousy father.

Is he in the right mind to feed something like ice to a person who's bedridden with fever?

Clearly he has lost some common sense.

"kay"

However I nodded in assent.

I raised my heavy body, then ate some ice.

"Is it good, Yuuichi?"

"Hmm"

"I see, it tastes good"

My father somehow smiled embarrassingly.

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We sat down by the riverbank, watching the nearby blooming sakura. The sakura, a bit late in blooming season, then scattered its petals in one go. The tiny, pink-colored petals came falling onto our heads.

"Pretty, no?" Rika said.

"It's pretty," I said back, nodding.

"It really is pretty, right?"

"Yeah, it really is pretty"

We kept on saying the same words again and again.

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As the sakura dances ---.

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Splashing water, I entered into the river, onward until my pants, rolled up to my knees, were wet. Dipping my hand into the river, I picked up a stone. It has no particular significance. It's just only that I'm bored that I turn up a stone.

"Yuuichi!"

Turning around at the source of the voice, it was Rika at the riverbank waving her hand.

"Hey!"

As I waved back, I lost balance and almost fell over.

As expected Rika was guffawing.

"Ah, too bad! Just a bit more and you would have fallen down!"

Grrrr. Annoyed, I picked up a stone from the riverbed and said.

"Rika! Have you seen a dragonfly larvae?"

"What, is that?"

"A bug that lives in the river! A bug!"

"A bug"

Rika immediately made a very disgusted face.

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Even Rika hates bugs as much as any girl does.

"Come on, I'll show it to you"

"It's okay! You don't have to show it!"

"You're hesitating"

I approached her closer, grinning broadly all the while.

"You don't have to"

"Nononono, I'm showing it to you for future reference. Come on, here's a bug, a bug!"

"Back off, sheesh! Yuuichi, you jerk!"

"H, hey! Quit throwing stones at me! That is not safe! We're screwed if I'm hit! Come on! I said quit throwing!"

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Rika was good-naturedly walking towards me. Just when my shirt sleeves are dried, my pants are now soaking wet. Rika was really a girl with a mean streak. Someone will be hurt if her stones scored a hit.

I had mumbled them out when I heard something in front of me.

"Akkafukuzenza-i, Akkafukuzenza-i, Akkafukuzenza-i"

Rika was singing, enchantingly sweet.

She was quite looking forward for the Akafukuzenzai. Her retreating figure and her voice were so child-like, I ended up smiling a little.

Rika is extremely fond of sweets.

At a certain store, not a main store, located near the inner shrine, we ate some Akafukuzenzai. Rika was all smiles.

"Is it good?"

When I asked that question, I got a nod.

"Delicious"

She was very much happy.

"It really is delicious, Yuuichi--"

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I was pulling my bicycle along, its wheels squeaking as they roll along. Rika was walking right beside me. The sun was setting in the mountains to the west, its crimson edges radiating. And just like that the day was over.

"That was fun"

Rika reluctantly said that. Even now she was looking back at the road to the shrine.

"It really was fun"

"Yeah"

I'm felt somewhat embarrassed. For us Oharai-machi and Okage-yoko-machi are rather disconnected to us locals, but that doesn't matter for Rika was enjoying them. I should rather be proud, because for me these are treasures.

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"We'll be coming back"

Rika nodded what I said.

"Sure. We'll be coming back, right?"

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"Next time we'll have Tekone-sushi. And probably some akafuku ice after that"

"What's that?"

Rika inquired with a serious look.

"Red beans on top of green tea-flavored shaved ice. Green tea, not green tea flavor, is mixed into the ice, so it tastes real good."

"We're coming back"

Rika said that quite forcefully.

"We will be coming back, Yuuichi"

"Sure"

I ended up smiling. For I never remembered a time when she would request that bad. Smiling, I boarded my bicycle, spun the pedals and readied my right foot them.

"Get in, Rika"

"Sure"

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Rika obediently sat on the rear rack.

And placed her hands onto my beltline.

"Let's go!"

"Yeah"

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I'm a bit embarrassed, and a bit proud.

I pressed hard on the pedals and started pedaling. I believed I can go anywhere. No matter how run-down the bicycle was, no matter how loose the chain was, as long as Rika was riding it can go anywhere.

The bicycle moved forward.

The bicycle Rika and I were riding on moved forward.

Our shadows, our silhouettes, stretched out ever longer.

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